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ABSTRACT

Twenty-eight prospective English teachers at a large midwestern state university participated in this study of what they believe literature to be and what criteria they apply in choosing texts they would teach. Although the prospective teachers reported that they had not been taught explicit criteria for evaluating texts, they had no difficulty generating criteria. Participants were presented with 7 books and 11 additional texts and were asked to discuss which ones seemed like literature. Rationales for classifying a text as literature fell into three categories: arguments that focused on features of the text itself; arguments that focused on how and/or why the author created the text; and arguments that focused on how a reader acts in response to the text. Participants selected, from a list of texts, six books that they would teach to an 11th grade class. Their selection was found to be based on themes, accessibility, genre, political reasons, the traditional canon, and aesthetics. Prospective teachers seemed to draw on a potpourri of ideas and experiences in responding to questions and tasks. They acted more as if they were learning in the moment than as if they were reporting older, previously articulated or well-rehearsed ideas, beliefs, and perceptions. Appendices provide materials related to the participants' tasks. (Contains 17 references.) (JDD)

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Abstract

What do prospective English teachers believe literature to be? What texts do they regard as literature and why? And what criteria do they apply in choosing texts they would teach? This report addresses these questions. The data comes from an extensive protocol of tasks and questions that the authors used with a nonrandom sample of 28 prospective English teachers at a larger Midwestern state university. In the report, the authors describe the range of responses they received and speculate on the sources of these responses. Although the prospective teachers—some of whom completed their undergraduate degrees during the study—reported that they had not been taught explicit criteria for evaluating texts, they had no difficulty generating criteria. Rather than self-consciously coherent arguments, they seemed to draw on a potpourri of ideas and experiences in responding to question and tasks. Part of a longitudinal study of prospective teachers' ideas and beliefs about literature and the teaching of literature, the data raise several questions for further analysis.

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How Do Prospective Teachers Think about Literature and the Teaching of Literature?

Diane Holt-Reynolds and G. Williamson McDiarmid

As teacher educators thinking carefully with prospective teachers about their developing personae and pedagogies, we are becoming ever more aware of how preservice teachers' "apprenticeships of observation" (Lortie, 1975) and their personal history-based beliefs (Holt-Reynolds, 1991) compliment and constrain our teaching and their learning. (See Ball, 1988; 1989; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991; Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; 1993; Knowles, 1990; McDiarmid, 1992.) After all, those who now would be teachers have long been those who act like students and, therefore, know a lot about classrooms, teacher behaviors, schools and students. They bring this knowledge with them as they formally study teacher education.

G. Williamson McDiarmid is Co-Director of the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning and a professor of teacher education at Michigan State University. Recently, his research has focused on the understandings that prospective English and history teachers develop of their subject matter and teaching their subject matter to diverse learners. He is a former secondary English and history teacher.

Diane Holt-Reynolds, an assistant professor of teacher education at Michigan State University, is a senior researcher with the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning. She is currently involved in learning more about the relationships between personal history, subject matter knowledge and adult development and the influences of these interactions on the learning of preservice teachers.

While we have available to us a rich, growing body of knowledge about the influences of personal history-based beliefs on prospective teachers' learning about professional principles of pedagogy, we have currently far less information about how their prior elementary school and high school experiences with the subject matters they expect to teach—reading and language arts in particular—interact with their formal, university-based education in a discipline—English. We wonder what happens when undergraduate students who have been doing the work associated with English and language arts classes since kindergarten or first grade and who have a wide variety of experiences as readers in non-school contexts as well, come to the university and pursue English—literature—as a formal discipline. How do they integrate their prior knowledge and experiences as readers with their formal studies of literature? How do they organize their thinking about literature? How do they develop a sense of what it means to read and understand literature? How do they translate that understanding into a pedagogy for teaching others?

Questions like these prompted us to ask a group of undergraduate English majors who plan to teach English at the high school level to talk with us about their developing understandings of literature and of how to teach it. (See McDiarmid, 1993.) While we are only beginning to explore the transcriptions of interviews with these prospective teachers, we have begun to look closely at what they said in response to two tasks in particular: a classification of texts task and a text selection task. Both tasks were designed to elicit prospective teachers' emerging definitions of literature as well as their sense of what readers and teachers might do with that literature. Both were intended as opportunities for us to understand more about *how* these prospective teachers think rather than to document *what* they know.

Our analyses are far from complete; however, even at this early stage of analysis, the data seem to support three broad observations. First, prospective English teachers apparently do indeed have at their disposal a set of beliefs about literature that guides their thinking about the literary qualities of texts. Second, despite the fact that these prospective teachers are English majors, they appear to have been, prior to our interview with them, unaware on a conscious level of these guiding beliefs or to have organized them into any coherent theory of literature. In fact, they tell us explicitly that they are considering the question "Just what *is* literature" for the first time as they classify texts with us in the interview setting. They use the interview tasks as opportunities to articulate, organize, try out and often reorganize their understandings. Finally, prospective literature teachers' reasoning about literary texts is context-specific. They respond somewhat differently to similar or related tasks depending on the kinds of specifics we include in our questions or tasks. This is not especially surprising, but it does remind us that their responses are as least as much a function of the kinds of tasks we ask them to do as they are a function of their reasoning process and knowledge.

This particular paper reports prospective literature teachers' responses during these two task-oriented portions of the extensive, six-hour, audio- and video-taped interview protocol. In the first task, we asked them to examine 18 examples of texts and to classify each as literature or not literature. In the second task, we asked them to select from a list of 30 titles the six texts they would imagine using as the curriculum of a future class of 11th grade students (see Appendix A). In theory, both tasks invited prospective literature teachers to act as if they had already done a great deal of thinking about literature, its defining characteristics, its teachable characteristics, its value in school curriculums. In reality, both tasks represented opportunities for those involved to think about their definitions of literature, to develop *as they talked* a list of the characteristics of literature and to articulate their tacit beliefs about the value of certain texts, of reading generally, of studying literature in particular. In both tasks, the participants acted more as if they were learning in the moment than as if they were reporting older, previously articulated or well-rehearsed ideas, beliefs and perceptions already integrated into their growing expertise as literature majors.

The data we report here are indeed preliminary. Most of those whose thinking we share here were part of our piloting of protocol items. Since we completed only parts of the interview with the individuals with whom we piloted those portions, we make no effort here to connect their responses across the two tasks or to their life histories as readers and students of literature. Making those connections will be the focus of our work in the future. Others whose responses we report here are part of our current, longitudinal study. Therefore, in this paper, we present the data in two parts—first, we report the character and range of responses that the text classification task elicited. Second, we report on the features of texts to which the prospective literature teachers in our sample attended and the criteria they used in choosing texts for teaching.

Across both tasks, we were impressed by the levels of engagement and thoughtfulness that seemed inherent to participants' responses. In the final section of this paper, we explore how their interactions with these tasks might prompt us as teacher educators to act differently as we engage preservice teachers in thinking about content-specific pedagogies and how we might proceed as researchers.

Task One: Classifying Texts As Literature

Participants engaged in this task at the end of the first part of the interview or the beginning of the second. They had been recalling their experiences as elementary, high school and college students with particular emphasis on themselves as readers. They had also spent time talking about their experiences as readers and writers more broadly—at home, in private, with friends—in arenas beyond school. What follows here is a description of the task itself and then a report of the range of decisions participants made about the texts and the rationales they used to support those decisions.

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Description of the Task

To begin the classification exercise, we placed onto the table in front of each interviewee seven books (see Appendix A). These included a hard-bound and obviously well-used volume of Shakespeare's plays, a history textbook, soft-bound copies of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, Agee and Walker's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Stephen King's *Misery*, Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Elise Guttenberg's *Sunder, Eclipse and Seed*. This last volume had a colorful cover depicting a young woman wearing flowing romantic clothing, hair blowing in the wind. We asked the interviewee to examine the texts and tell us which, if any, seemed like literature. We asked them to think aloud and share their reasoning with us. As they talked, we sometimes asked clarifying questions like, "What makes you think that?" or "Can you talk about that some more?"

After the interviewee seemed to have finished talking and thinking about these initial texts, we presented, one by one, eleven additional texts in the following order: a copy of *The New Yorker*, a magazine advertisement for a car, Ezra Pound's poem, In "A Station of the Metro," a business memo, a copy of *Ebony*, a copy of *People*, the *New York Times*, *The State News* (their university's student newspaper), a printed set of rap lyrics, a photocopy of a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon strip and a copy of Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner." As the interviewee reacted to each text, we sometimes prompted further conversation by asking questions like, "Would this be literature if . . . ," or "So, would it be right to say that all [name of a text type] are . . . ?" In each case, we waited to probe until the interviewee had apparently said all he or she intended to say about the item. We also tailored these probes to reflect the particular theory the interviewee seemed to be building.

Prospective Teachers' Responses

Participants responded to the task on two levels. On one level, they made judgments about whether each of the texts is or might be literature. While decisions about particular texts hold a certain interest, by themselves they tell us little about what these English majors know, believe or how they think about literature. The second level of participants' responses reveals more about their knowledge of literature. As they classified the texts, participants offered rationales to explain or defend their decisions.

These rationales fascinate us—again, on two levels. First, they seem to represent the range of elements these English majors know how to notice and use to inform their decisions about texts. On this level, the rationales appear to point us toward the content of these prospective English teachers' knowledge about literature. On a second level, the rationales seem to act as a window through which we can watch and listen as these English majors notice and put together—usually for the first time—their many ideas about literature. In the act of talking about the texts, offering rationales and then attempting to use the rationales as a basis for making decisions about additional texts, these English majors appeared to be synthesizing across complex, competing and sometimes conflicting beliefs. They seemed to use the task as an occasion to listen to their own thinking and learn about their own ideas.

The transcripts of their conversations are rich because participants seemed to immerse themselves in their own thinking as they proceeded through the task of classifying the texts and because the resulting rationales seemed to evolve as participants talked, decided, returned to previous decisions and changed them in light of later decisions and, in this way, literally worked their way toward completing the task and articulating a point of view. We have selected the think-aloud of one participant, Daphne, to explicate more specifically here. Her method of dealing with the ambiguity of the task, with her own conflicting ideas and with her sense that she should articulate a coherent point of view typifies the sort of processes participants used.

A Process for Finding a Point of View

Daphne began the exercise telling the interviewer, "I'm thinking, 'Why do I think this is literature, and why don't I?'" In her early arguments, she referenced her feelings as her guide. "It doesn't seem like lit. . . . It's just the feeling I'm getting." She quickly listed a variety of elements that helped her make positive decisions about *Sunder, Eclipse and Seed*, *Native Son* and the volume of Shakespeare's

plays. These texts all evidenced dialogue, told a story or expressed an author's point of view. Shakespeare, she also noted, "is certainly literature because when I think of literature, Shakespeare crops into my mind. . . . He's a great writer. . . . Maybe just because I'm studying it in a literature class."

While Daphne evidenced little conflict about how to classify these three texts, she wavered about others. She debated about *On the Origin of the Species*. "I guess I would consider this literature. I would say it is a kind of literature. [It's] not like a textbook even though it's factual. It's not a story; it's something to read." She also found *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* more difficult to classify. On the positive side, she noted, "I think this could be considered literature. . . . It tells a story." However, Daphne also noticed that the text was "factual," a feature that troubled her. She put it aside saying, "It doesn't seem like literature." Taking up *The American Pageant*, she noted that it too was "factual." However, she reasoned:

> It's literature kind of because it's giving us a picture of what things were like and how they were formed, and it's letting us create [a picture of] it in our own mind. But for some reason, it's not [literature] because it's not really that pleasurable. Maybe I associate literature with pleasure.

Relying mostly on this last criteria, pleasure for a reader, Daphne decided that the history textbook was not literature.

> It is boring. My mind can't wander as much. I can't get into it as much. I wouldn't pick up [*The American Pageant* or *On the Origin of the Species*], I'd pick up something like [*Native Son*]. That's what I picture literature as. It's going to make me explore feelings within myself and learn something about myself while I'm learning what the book is about.

Pound's poem gave her even more difficulty. It was clearly new to her—Daphne assumed Ezra Pound to be a woman. She initially reacted negatively to the poem's brevity.

> I've never seen anything like this before. I don't know if I can say this is literature. I mean, she [Pound] wrote it; it was her feelings, her little expression. In a way, I would consider it literature, but it's just like a little thought. Usually, I think, literature is long. I don't know.

Newspapers, too, met some of Daphne's guiding premises about literature while violating others. "It's about things that are going on in our world right now. Informative. Factual. It doesn't have anything to do with pleasure though." But *People* magazine earned her most confident, unwavering negative decision. "I wouldn't say this is literature. This is gossip. I'll pick up this magazine if I'm waiting in the dentist's office. That's not literature."

However, Daphne did not let her decision rest. Without any additional probing by the interviewer she continued:

> *Time* magazine would maybe be considered literature. It's informative. But then why wouldn't I consider a newspaper literature? Hmmm. I'm only getting myself into a hole here. I don't know. I wonder if it's just the feeling I'm getting. . . . I separate many of these [magazines] from literature. There might be literature contained in them. . . . But I wouldn't consider magazines as a whole literature.

After similarly dismissing all the magazines, the ad, and the memo, Daphne came to "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" and to the rap lyrics. She judged the poem to be literature on the grounds that "This one flows longer than [the Pound poem]. There's more description in this one. Each line is a different thought. I can get a little more of a picture. Granted, it's small, but. . . ." She then returned to the Pound poem to continue her comparison; however, something began to happen to Daphne. She actually read the two-line poem. She began to notice that, like the Jarrell poem, "There are so many things we can think of, interpretations."

She initially rejected the rap lyrics too; however, she retracted her decision—once again as she read and thought about the material.

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> At first I was thinking, "It's a rap song. No, that's not literature; it's a poem." But now that I think about it more, [the lyrics are] stories too. Like expression. You know, normally I would just put them in a totally different category than literature. But even though it's a rap song, I would consider it literature.

At the very beginning of the task Daphne had looked at text to see whether it told a story or expressed an author's ideas as a way to judge whether it would be literature. She returned to these criteria but with an expanded sense of what might constitute a story or an expression of an author's idea. Rap lyrics and poems were beginning to look like literature to her.

Judging the Calvin and Hobbes cartoon and reasoning aloud about it seemed to invite Daphne to explore a new point of view.

> Calvin and Hobbes. I don't know. Maybe. It's kind of telling the world how [Waterson] sees these two little characters, . . . his point of view. This is kind of literature. I'm thinking like with the song, "This is comic literature; this isn't literature." Telling by the criterion I've already set up, I guess it wouldn't make sense to consider it. It's making a point—no matter what kind of point it is, whether it's trivial or controversial. Hoping to see through his eyes what it is he's seeing.

She went on to "change the Pound" to classify it as literature because "After seeing the Randall Jarrell one, I came to terms with [the length]. [Pound] leaves you to interpret in your own way and is telling it through her eyes, her thought. It shouldn't matter how long it is."

The changes continued as Daphne and the interviewer discussed whether parts of magazines might be literature. Daphne said, "By the things I'm saying, [the magazine articles] fit the criteria. So, I would have to mess up your whole study and say, 'Yes.'" A few moments later, as the exercise drew to a close, Daphne noted:

> I'm half wondering that anything you can read is literature and [there are] different ways you can look at it. Literature is informative; literature does tell a story—but not all the time. Literature lets you know something you normally wouldn't. I guess all these things are literature right in front of me right now, but by my personal standards. . . . I don't mean to contradict myself, if I have—and I have. But literature is all those things. . . . I'm going to have to change what I said. . . . I just realized it just now. And I'm going to have to think about it more to give a little more back up to why I all of a sudden changed my mind.

Daphne advanced a rationale early in the interview, amended it, set up exceptions and then "heard" herself. We believe it is significant that she noticed conflicting beliefs in the act of reading the texts and acting out her knowledge as a literature major. She could "make pictures" while reading the Jarrell poem; she found a story line in the rap lyrics; she "interpreted" as she read Pound, Jarrell and Waterson. These are all actions, ways she has learned to behave when confronted by an unknown text. Daphne seemed to be using knowledge-in-practice (see Schön, 1983)—knowledge she could access as she engaged in the activities she associates with literature. Apparently, as she acted out the behaviors of "doing" literature, these actions gave her access to a more abstract, propositional knowledge—what Schön might call knowledge-of-practice. We believe she evidenced reflection. She framed her thinking about texts first based on one set of features and then, after actually reading some of the troublesome texts, elected to attend to a different set of features. She reframed her decisions about those texts in light of her attention to her own actions as a reader. Her premises and rationales, therefore, evolved in ways that seemed to contradict her first feelings about what to classify as literature and what to exclude. At that moment in the interview, she revised her earlier decisions. She apparently talked her way to a different understanding—or at least a different consciousness of her understanding—about literature.

Daphne's reaction to the task of classifying texts, her revisions of criteria based on subsequent judgments, was dramatic but typical. Others we have interviewed so far make assertions about texts, notice particular features, use these to judge subsequent texts, revise their working hypotheses or add dimensions to it. We offer these bits of Daphne's thinking as a way to share what the task is like for prospective English teachers and how they approach it.

Each prospective teacher in our sample made decisions about each text. We explore those briefly below. Each also advanced a set of criteria for making their decisions. These criteria took the form of rationales offered piecemeal as texts gave the participants a reason to notice and address elements of literature that could be salient to a judgment. We catalogue these rationales in this report.

Decisions about Texts

Most participants classified most of these texts as literature. (See Appendix B.) Shakespeare received unanimous, unqualified support. Magazines prompted a mixed set of decisions; many participants who made positive decisions—classified magazines as literature—did so with extensive and substantive qualifications. Most of the prospective teachers decided that the memo was not literature while the Calvin & Hobbes cartoon, the rap lyric and the advertisement played to mixed reviews.

The tabulation of decisions may hold a certain interest; however, the rationales these prospective teachers offered to support their decisions and the thinking that produced those rationales is the focus of our interest. For example, they classified texts produced by such diverse authors as Shakespeare, Darwin and Stephen King as literature, but they did so while offering a variety of quite different reasons By looking at these reasons, we can begin to understand their theories of what makes text literature.

Rationales about Decisions

We offered participants little that would help them focus, narrow or constrain this task of determining whether a text is literature. The resulting purposeful ambiguity allowed us to document the range of text elements or features that English majors might choose to notice, address or use as criteria for making the judgments we asked them to make. Some participants modified the task, interpreting it to ask "What could be literature?" or "What would most people say is literature?" The rationales they offer to support their decisions reflect these various takes on the task.

Despite the fact that our sample to date is small, we found redundancy in the arguments. These arguments or rationales fall into three large categories: (a) arguments that focused on features of the text itself; (b) arguments that focused on how and/or why the author created the text; and (c) arguments that focused on how a reader acts in response to the text.

Focus on the text. As they talked about their decisions to classify a text as literature, most of the English majors we interviewed made references to the text itself. They pointed out features of it as a text that they were using to guide their classification.

Literature is writing. Perhaps the most basic distinction some of these English majors articulated was that between written and oral texts. Several argued that any written text either is or could be considered literature. Participants seemed to rely most heavily on this distinction to guide their decisions about texts they could not defend as literature on any other grounds. The ad, the romance novel and the rap lyrics fell into this category for some English majors.

Even though this criterion might seem to be rather cut and dried—a text is either written or it is not—at least one participant saw the issue as more complex. "I would call [the rap lyrics] literature because it's in front of me, and it's written down on paper, but when it's being performed, I wouldn't call it literature" (Jack). When asked if a performance of one of Shakespeare's plays or poetry that is read aloud would still be literature, he responded, "That throws a wrench into it! . . . I would have a separate category for music . . .[and] plays. . . . Maybe spoken literature could be part of the figure of literature."

Literature tells a story. As they examined the texts, many participants pointed out that some texts were stories while others reported "facts." They used this distinction to guide their decisions about whether the texts might be literature. Some argued that only texts that tell stories can be literature. Interestingly, some participants justified including poetry and rap lyrics as literature because they perceived these texts as telling stories: "['In a

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Station of the Metro'] tells a story through imagery. Literature doesn't have to be a long story" (Keith); "I would consider poetry literature because poetry tells a story" (Brooke); "[Rap lyrics], they're stories too" (Daphne).

Literature is fiction. Some participants who distinguished between texts that tell stories and texts that are "factual" defined "story" more narrowly. They noticed that stories can be classified as either fiction or non-fiction, and they judged that only fictional stories can be considered literature. "I would consider all Shakespeare's books literature because they're personal stories. They're not like the histories of peoples' lives . . . [They are] not real people, but people that he's created." (Brooke)

Several English majors objected to classifying *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, *On the Origin of Species*, *The American Pageant* and parts of magazines as literature on the grounds that these texts are factual rather than story-like or, if a story, not a fictional one. "I wouldn't think of [*On the Origin of Species*] as literature . . . because it's factual; it's based on scientific concepts whereas a book is more fictional" (Catherine). She went on to explain that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* would not be literature either since "I have never really thought about anything nonfiction as being literature."

Some participants listed the elements of fiction that they understood as necessary components of literature. When they perceived that a text lacked these elements, they judged it to be something other than literature. "I would not say [*The American Pageant*] is literature. . . . There is no central character, no characterization. This is nonliterature" (Keith).

Participants argued that newspapers cannot be considered literature for similar reasons. They pointed to the informative, factual nature of the stories in newspapers and classified them as not literature. However, one participant, Jack, used this same argument to explain his decision that newspapers were, in fact, literature. He believed that the informative nature of news indeed made it literature.

Literature has a theme or message. Some participants focused closely on the actual contents of texts. They believed that a text must have a theme or a message for the reader in order to be considered literature. If they perceived a text as having a message or a point, they justified it as literature. "[With] the classics, there is something like a bigger issue. . . . [The stories] can be applied." (Catherine)

> Shakespeare would be classical literature. [It's] more meaningful literature. More deep society values. Maybe you could learn from the romance novel, but this is more the pursuit of education. The author is trying to make a point. (Brooke)

While participants used terms like "theme" or "message" or "point" to talk about elements they looked for in literature, they used the word "purpose" to talk about elements they notice in texts that are something other than literature. Participants who talked about "the purpose of a text" typically did so to explain how that text failed to be literature. When participants believed that a text's purpose was to inform, they often did not classify it as literature. One English major, Taylor, summed up the set of rationales defending negative classification of the advertisements: "The goals are different. The purposes are different. The goal is to sell the car and make the money, not to get a point across."

Other purposes that earned the text a negative classification included to entertain, to inform a regional audience and to serve any purpose other than pleasure. These prospective teachers used rationales about purposes and messages more frequently than any other set of rationales.

Literature is books. While not a dominate criteria to most participants, some participants argued that some texts we showed them could be considered literature if the format were changed—if the text were in a book. For example, one participant noted that Calvin and Hobbes as one strip is not literature but that if several strips together took the form of a book, then that book might be literature.

Another reasoned that stories in magazines are not literature, but if they were collected into book form, those stories would be literature.

Literature is prose. When participants were faced with the poems or perceived the rap lyrics as poetry, they sometimes used the nonprose form of those texts as a way to guide their thinking. While everyone interviewed classified the appropriate texts as poetry, they disagreed about whether poetry as a form is also literature. Many participants commented on poetry as a form and wondered whether it would still be literature or whether poetry should be a class in itself. Some argued that the poetry we showed them is not literature because it does not tell a story. These were individuals who recognized telling a story as a defining feature of literature. They noted that poems like "In a Station of the Metro" without characters could not be stories—or literature. Others, like Daphne, argued that poems do indeed tell stories and so are literature. Some others contended that poetry is literature because it contains a theme or message.

Most of the arguments raised in defense of poetry as literature focused on authors' motives or readers' actions when reading poems. We will explore these arguments in later sections of this paper. Even though some participants reasoned that a piece of fiction is literature because its form is fiction, only one argued that poetry is literature simply because it is poetry.

Science and history can be literature, too. Noticing that a text could fit a category other than literature did not always hinder participants from classifying it as literature. Several participants categorized Darwin as scientific and also as literature. They reacted to the scientific quality of the text as well as some additional element that persuaded them of its status as literature. "Even though it's scientific, I would still say it's literature. . . . [That's because of] the way he writes. It's written in the first person." (Keith)

> Science is literature to me. History is literature to me because it is written about a time period we don't understand—we weren't there. [The authors] have to write it down. Therefore, it becomes literature because it is written and because it is in the past. I put [*The American Pageant]* in the definite, obvious literature pile. (Taylor)

More often, however, when participants noticed that a text could be classified as something other than literature, they did so. This alternative classification seemed to satisfy some participants as a sufficient reason for eliminating a text as literature. Poetry is one example. Other categories that eliminated texts as literature included scientific writing (Darwin), textbook writing (*The American Pageant*), nonfiction stories in magazines or newspapers, music (the rap lyrics), comics (Calvin & Hobbes), and entertainment (Calvin & Hobbes, *People*, the newspaper).

Literature can be any length. Three participants reacted to the length of a text. Pound's poem of two lines served to elicit these comments. "The length of a poem doesn't really matter so much. I can't say that one work is more valid than another because it's longer" (Catherine); "Literature doesn't have to be long. Just two lines can say a lot" (Keith); "[Pound]? Yes and no. It probably is because of the length. I'm not used to it. It is playing a role [in my decision]" (Daphne).

Literature endures over time. Participants raised questions about whether a work "will endure" as they tried to reach a decision about whether that text might be literature. One participant, Taylor, argued that *Misery* is literature because in 100 years it will have endured and will be seen as "a classic." Another, Catherine, argued that "Stephen King's books are so appreciated. [*Misery*] is, I think, an enduring piece." Many argued that Shakespeare is literature on this basis. Mona stated, It's just endured so much. You can update [his plays]."

Texts can become literature when they are old. Only one individual so far has reacted to the antiquity of a text. For Taylor, the ability of a text to endure was not so important. Instead, she argued that, while anything written is literature, nothing contemporary can be "classical" literature. Only texts with story

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lines about the past seemed like "strong" literature to her. She argued that contemporary texts are "weak literature" now but can become "strong, classic literature" after a space of twenty to 100 years. She used this theory consistently to explain how both "classical" and contemporary texts can be literature even though they are "different literature."

Some texts are literature by reputation. Several participants justified classifying a text as literature by asserting it to be a classic in the eyes of others. Shakespeare collected the majority of these rationales. "Shakespeare—he's famous. A lot of people have heard of him. Most schools require students to read one Shakespeare play sometime in their careers" (Jack); "Shakespeare is literature in the most obvious way. Because you have always been taught that is how it is" (Taylor); and:

> High literature is what we read at college. It's put in this category by professors and people who tell us what literature is. . . .Shakespeare—I'd definitely say it's literature because it just is. Shakespeare is in a class by himself. (Mona)

Native Son, too, earned defense as literature on the grounds that others believe it is literature. Participants noted that they had heard of it or that it is "obviously" a classic. One English major read the back cover, noted the novel is compared there to *The Grapes of Wrath*, and reasoned that since *The Grapes of Wrath* is a classic, *Native Son* must be as well.

Another participant, Taylor, noted that the reputation of the author could confer literary status on a text. Upon receiving confirmation that Pound's poem is published, Taylor argued that the poem is literature in part because its author is well known. Her reasoning seemed to be that any published author has a reputation and that a reputation as an author is integral to the reputation of the poem and its status as literature.

> [How] people perceive literature, [they think] it has to be published. I think people ride a lot on how known, how famous, how prominent works are. The first foundation of that is [whether it is] published. So, I think people classify [Pound's poem] as literature because it is in the form of poetry, and then it falls into being published.

Some participants noted that they judged texts as other than literature if they perceived them as obscure—lacking a reputation—or if they believed others would scorn or not value these texts as literary. Two, Brooke and Herschel, decided that *Sunder, Eclipse and Seed* would not be literature because it is not a book that either would admit reading or discuss with friends. Other individuals argued that Pound's poem, magazines, memos and advertisements would not be considered literature by the general public and so classified these texts something other than literature.

Focus on the Author

We believe that participants' rationales give us a way to document the kinds of understandings they have about literature. We therefore pay attention to ways that participants shifted their focus as they talked about the texts. While some of their rationales are reminiscent of some of their text-based ideas about literature, we believe their focus on the actions of authors represents additional knowledge about literature.

Many defended their judgments by looking at evidence of the author's skill or intentions. One participant's logic as applied to a variety of texts may be especially easy to follow:

> [Pound] wanted to be a poet, and he meant [the poem] to be artsy. [This is] another category for literature—something that strives to be literature. . . . Some musicians write lyrics to be like poetry. They like to think of themselves as poets. . . . If this were a legitimate memo, it wouldn't be [literature]. But if you made it up, I would reread it and see if you had some kind of purpose or message. . . . You could make it literature. . . . Calvin and Hobbes is difficult [to classify] because I think Bill Waterson has a kind of higher purpose in mind. (Mona)

Authors of literature have insight into human nature. Participants also noticed that the author's skill with language or insights into human nature might set some works aside as literature while leaving others in some other category. This was one argument many English majors used in defense of Shakespeare as literature. They pointed to his skill with language. Shakespeare's "style of writing,"

according to one participant, Keith, included ability to create sophisticated, complex characters. He extended his argument to include a defense of *Misery*.

> [*Sunder, Eclipse and Seed]* is too casual. The character motivation is pretty obvious. It's not like "A Rose For Miss Emily;" you don't have to wonder what's going on in the character's mind. The same thing with *Misery*, too, even though I love Stephen King. . . . He has really great insight into human nature. I would really be torn between calling [*Sunder, Eclipse and Seed* or *Misery*] literature. [King] is a really great writer. That's a really hard one, because he does have some really complex characters.

Other participants, too, noted specific skills that authors might exhibit if they are writing literature. These included use of dialogue, of the first person, of description—metaphor in particular—and of formal language more generally.

Authors of literature write in sophisticated ways. Some participants reacted to the "depth" or "surface" treatment of issues or characters by an author. Brooke's comment above is one example. Others include Keith:

> [*Misery*] is a really hard one because [King] does have some really complex characters. . . . They are not surface, typical characters. . . . [In *Sunder, Eclipse and Seed*,] it's too casual. The character motivations are pretty obvious. You don't have to wonder what's in the characters' minds.

Another participant, Mona, used her sense of whether an author has written in sophisticated ways as a basis for thinking about how to classify comic books and the rap lyrics. While she made different decisions about the status of these texts, the point here is that she used the sophistication level of the writing as a criterion. "[Comic books], they're like really sophisticated. . . .Not a lot of rap songs [are literature]. Some of them are very superficial."

Authors of literature write about generalizable characters. One participant, Catherine, noted that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—a book she had not read—could be considered literature if its themes represent experiences that are relevant to a large group of people.

> Maybe this is a book about a person who has experienced these things and is talking about something that many other people have also experienced. So [the author] is using the main character to represent a group of people. I would consider that literature.

Not all participants offered rationales about an author's intentions or skills to support their decisions. Those who did, however, tended to use these rationales liberally and across the range of text types.

Focus on the Reader

This final category of rationales has been largely foreshadowed by many of the participants' comments cited above. We report these rationales separately because, in so doing, we hope to detail more accurately and completely the reasoning these preservice teachers applied to the task of determining which texts might be literature and the indirect task of creating a definition of literature.

Many of their reasons for classifying a text as literature rested on their experiences as readers. They defended certain texts as literature by projecting how those texts might require or enable readers to behave.

The most oblique group of rationales in this category were frequently made in passing, almost as after-thoughts and always along with other, apparently more potent rationales. Participants simply noted the uses for a text. Jack, for example, classified *Native Son* as literature and noted that it could be used as history and shared qualities with *The American Pageant*. Keith explained that he uses newspapers as sources of information and that *People* might be used by others as a way to satisfy curiosity. Brooke defended *Misery* as possible literature on the grounds that it might provide a reader with emotional release.

Noting that a text may be used as history or as an information source may not be very different from noting that a text's purpose is to convey historical facts or that a text can be classified as history or as a newspaper rather than as literature. At this point in our study, we find the emphasis the participants placed on the reader's use of text worth reporting and see it as an alternate way some English majors

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have developed for thinking about literature. Some seem to rely on projections about use and other reader actions as ways to judge whether a text is literature.

Herschel offered multiple rationales in defense of his decision to classify every text we presented to him as literature. Virtually all of these rationales focused on how the text might be acted on by a reader.

> [Agee and Walker] can bring social consciousness into the classroom. It could be used in a history class. . . . I consider [*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*] literature because it describes the human experience as does that Shakespeare over there. When a person reads something and they respond to it, it could just as well be fiction. You're going to create images of this stuff in your mind. You're going to form a hypothesis about it. In the same way you'll run into a striking passage in [Shakespeare] that leaves an impression on your mind for a long, long time and informs you about the human condition. [*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men]* does the same thing. Maybe literature is a resource that maybe teaches you or instructs you. My only criteria of literature is that it in some way instructs one about the universe.

This is just a sample of the reasoning Herschel offered to defend every text in the task as literature. He noted that, while some texts might not be literature for him, they would be literature for others.

Other participants echoed his reasoning. They frequently noted that a text could "make the reader think" as a way to defend it as literature. This reasoning appeared with great frequency around Pound's poem. Four of the participants defended their classification of this poem as literature largely on the grounds that it "makes you think," "leaves you to interpret," "makes you visualize," or "makes you feel." By the end of the classifying activity, Taylor explained that she was interested in the time frames of the literature because she believed that texts of more antiquity require greater analytic actions by readers. The more analysis a text required, she reasoned, the more it approached the status of classical literature. Keith may have been referring to something similar when he noted that "literature to me isn't casual reading. *[Sunder, Eclipse and Seed]* is very casual reading. I don't think I would classify it as literature."

Similarly, some participants denied literature status to texts if they believed that those texts "let your mind wander," provided no characters to "get into," or required no interpretation. Taylor argued that magazines, newspapers and other popular, contemporary texts required no analysis on the part of a reader—"we know what it means"—and so were only "weak" forms of literature.

These rationales focusing on texts, authors and readers contain the premises these English majors frequently used to guide their decisions about texts. We find it more than merely curious that the categories into which their rationales seem to fall recapitulate the tensions about the relative roles of readers, authors and texts that fuel the debates in contemporary criticism circles. It may be that English majors re-invent major critical stances as they master the discipline of literature.

Task Two: Selecting Texts for Teaching

We asked prospective teachers about their criteria for texts that they would want their students to read in two contexts. In the first, we asked the following:

- Are there particular texts that you think *all* high school students should read?
- [If yes:] What are some of these? Why these?
- [If no:] How would you go about deciding what your high school students will read?

We then asked them to look over a list of texts, choose six books they would teach to an eleventh grade class and tell us why they chose each of the texts. (See Appendix C for question and list of books.) Our list is based on survey data collected from high school teachers on the texts they taught (Applebee, 1990). We used these data to construct three different categories of literature: the traditional canon,

the traditional school canon, and literature by people of color. Literature from all three categories that teachers report using most frequently make up the list.

Danny: An Example of a Response

Danny was an English major, in his junior year and enrolled in a teacher education program that placed special emphasis on prospective teachers' subject matter understanding and its relationship to teaching. Asked whether or not there were books that all students should read, he responded:

> I don't think there's any books that are absolutely necessary. I think there's some, there's so much great literature out there that, you know, kids can benefit from a thousand different things.

Responding to our question about how he would decide which texts to teach, he said that both his purposes and the accessibility of the text—could students relate the story to their own lives, would they understand the text, would they enjoy it—would dictate his selections. As an example, he mentioned *Catcher in the Rye*. He believed that teaching texts that students could relate to their lives is particularly critical at the beginning of the year because "If they really enjoy it, then they are going to want to read more, and they'll take more chances, and they'll be less critical."

We asked those in the sample to report whether or not they had read the texts on the list. We wanted to understand the basis for their selections and reasoned that prospective teachers were more likely to select texts with which they were already familiar. Presented with the list of 35 texts, Danny reported having read 18. Of the 12 texts by African-American authors, he reported having read 4—a fact relevant to the choices he made. He proceeded to select texts on the basis of several criteria. He began with *The Red Badge of Courage* because "it ties in with so many important ideas in naturalism" and it denounces what war does to people. Then he selected *The Invisible Man* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* because they are written "from a minority perspective"—a perspective that he believed "absolutely has to be taught."

We asked how he might change his list of six books if he were teaching in a mostly white, lower-middle-class and working-class school.

> I think it's so important for schools like this to understand the black experience, because, living where they do, they don't get any grasp of it. . . . This is the same school I went to—you see all the racism. People aren't outwardly racist but they're terribly, terribly racist in schools like this so often. Most of it stems from just not understanding and not being around black people and not having black friends, or friends of any other color other than their own. So, I think it'd be equally as important to teach *Autobiography of Malcolm X* in this school, given that I read it and that it was appropriate, and maybe drop *Of Mice and Men*.

However, he subsequently dropped *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* because he hadn't yet read it.

Consistent with his earlier comments, he then selected *A Separate Peace* and *A Catcher in the Rye* because he felt students could relate "not only to the individual situations but also to the feelings that they're having." And, whereas he had justified his selections up to this point on either socio-political grounds or their accessibility to youth, he then nominated *Macbeth* because it "is a classic and everybody has to have Shakespeare, I suppose." Perhaps feeling that his "canon" argument was a bit luke-warm, he went on to note that he really liked *Macbeth* and thought it exemplified "all the literary techniques that Shakespeare is so expert at." Finally, returning to his belief in the importance of texts to which youth can relate, he chose *Of Mice and Men*, adding that the "story evokes so much emotion" because it is about "the cruelty of men." But having chosen *Of Mice and Men*, he then proceeded to drop it in favor of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* for each school setting about which we asked him.

In the case of the predominantly African-American and Latino school, he argued that "It's important for . . . the African-American students to read authors who have done something really important with their lives, to see that there are role models out there." In addition to *The Autobiography*, he mentioned *A Raisin in the Sun* as a text he might use in this setting. Later, he further qualified his choice

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of *The Autobiography*, saying that he would definitely want to read it before deciding because it might be "really militant." In the extensive quotation above, he argued that African-American literature is particularly important for students in predominantly white schools because of their limited experience with people different from themselves. Asked if he had the same concern that *The Autobiography* . . . might be too "militant" in this setting, he responded:

> I would be afraid, more afraid [in the predominantly African-American and Latino school] because I don't know exactly how the students would react. I don't know what it's all about, like I said. But in this school, are the white people going to beat themselves up? I just I think in schools like [the predominantly white school], things have to be shaken up a little bit because nobody understands where these feelings are coming from. I think maybe a book like that would be even more appropriate here.

Danny identified his own school as being like the predominantly white, working and lower-middle class school. Describing the limited experiences that the students in such a school have with non-white people, he is describing his own experiences. This seems particularly important to note as we try to understand his insistence that students in predominantly white schools be required to read books by African-American authors that describe the experiences of racism and injustice African Americans have suffered.

Danny's thinking is like most of the other prospective English teachers in our sample. His reasoning about texts for teaching was an amalgam of ideas, a stew of rationales that included considerations of: social and political imperatives in a racially diverse society steeped in injustice; the impact of various experiences—war, cruelty—on human sensibilities; the situations and characters to whom students are likely to relate (based in part on what he related to in high school); and experiences with particular canonical texts students need to have. He held diverse purposes for teaching literary texts, purposes expressed through the specific texts he chose and the reasons he offered for these choices.

His comments suggest that he also thinks about the relationship between the context and the text in ways we had not anticipated. For instance, he appeared to believe that the reason for requiring African-American students to read books by African-American authors is that students of color need role models and that the African-American authors can provide these. White students, on the other hand, need exposure to a broader spectrum of human experiences, particularly to the political and social injustices that people of color have encountered in United States society—and texts by African-American authors can provide these. Consequently, he argued that both African-American and white students read books by African-American authors, but for distinctly different reasons. His thinking, in short, seems more textured, more nuanced than we have been led to expect by those who view college students as the passive dupes of political correctness. Danny's thinking, like that of others in our sample, defies easy categorization and serves as a warning to those who wish to generalize about the way prospective English teachers think about texts for teaching or about the relationship between text and context.

Prospective English Teachers' Thinking About Text Selection

In responding to these two different items, the prospective teachers in our pilot sample used a number of the same criteria to guide their thinking. We did find, however, differences that lend support to our belief that prospective teachers' thinking about literary texts is context-specific. The chart on the following page shows the responses of those in our pilot sample to the two items—one that asks the criteria for selecting texts in general and the other that asks in the context of specific texts.

Themes: Particularly striking about this chart is that, whereas the most frequently mentioned reason for choosing particular texts from our list was the theme of the work, none of the prospective teachers mentioned themes when we asked them how they would decide, in general, which texts to teach. Bart, a senior, justified all the texts he chose by describing their themes, explaining that each involved some type of crisis: physical (*The Red Badge of Courage*), societal (*Soul on Ice*), individual

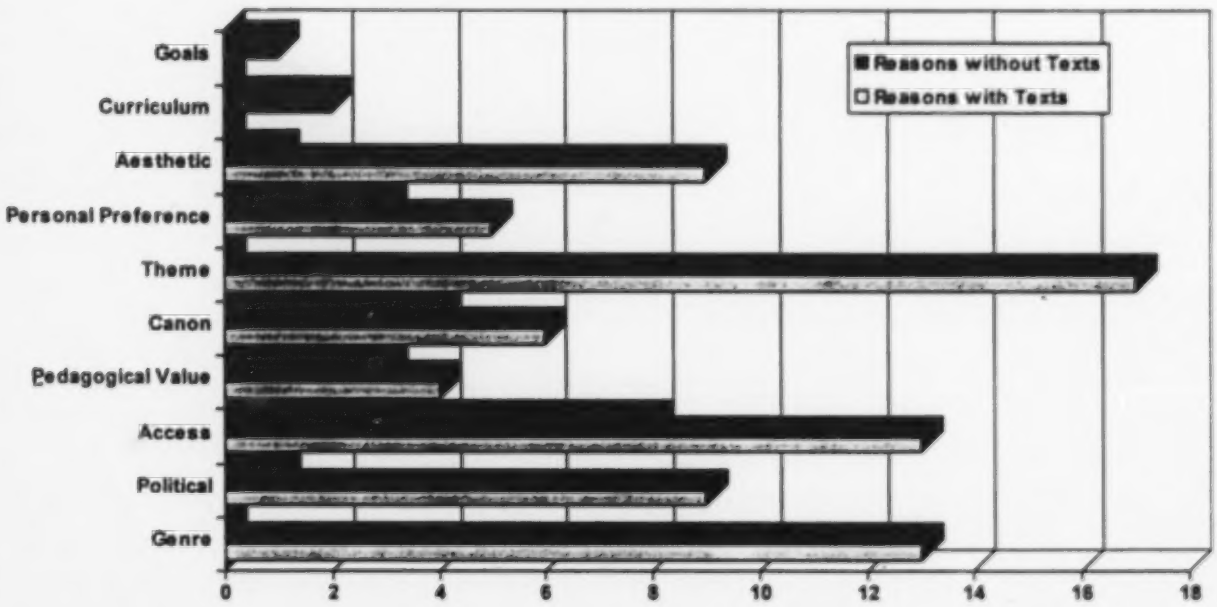
(*The Catcher in the Rye*), power (*Macbeth*), and conflict between individuals (*Ethan Frome* and *The Chosen*). Similarly Mary selected *The Chosen* and *Macbeth* in part because of the conflict she thought to be the theme of these works. The theme of *The Grapes of Wrath*, according to Mary, is "moral values." Explaining her selection of *The Great Gatsby*, Julie said, "It's an interesting look at the jazz age and power, corruption—a lot of pertinent issues . . . that could be looked at in today's society."

Other themes used to justify text selections included: enjoy it while you have it—*Our Town* (Mona); questions about society—*The Lord of the Flies* (Jack); the importance of reading and education—*The Life of Frederick Douglass* (Jack); treatment of women and children—*The Scarlett Letter* (Julie); the cruelty of man—*Of Mice and Men* (Danny).

The themes these prospective English teachers identified seem to be didactic in nature; these themes represent what they believed students could learn from reading the texts. Yet, for those in the sample, themes appear to be associated with specific texts; asked about how they would select texts in general, none of the prospective teachers mentioned theme as the salient criterion.

Accessibility: Most of the prospective English teachers questioned and then projected a sense of whether particular texts would be accessible to students, both in justifying specific selections and in talking generally about criteria for choosing texts. This was the criterion that our prospective teachers most often offered when asked, in general, about how they would choose books. Seven of the nine prospective teachers mentioned their students' interests and preferences as a criterion for deciding what they should read. Danny laid out a series of questions he would ask in deciding on texts. All focused on this issue of accessibility: "How are my students going to relate to this? Are they going to understand

Number of Times Prospective English Teachers Cited Specific Reasons for Selecting Particular Texts to Teach[1]



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this? Are they going to be able to relate it to their own lives? Are they going to enjoy it? Are they going to learn?" Mona, a senior who had completed her student teaching, used race as one way of identifying students' interests—"If they were all black, of course, I think I would pick something that was black"—and said she might even have the students complete a survey as a way to varify their interests.

Another piece of the accessibility issue focused on the ways that resources limit teachers' choices: Jack mentioned as a criterion the physical availability of multiple copies of the text to his students.

In discussing their reasons for selecting specific texts, all the prospective teachers noted, in relation to one text or another, that students will be able to relate to the characters or story. All three of the prospective teachers who selected *The Catcher in the Rye* offered just this reason. As Danny said after choosing it as the first text he would teach, "Every kid can relate to that . . . if you start them off with stuff that they really enjoy, then they're going to want to read more . . . It's important to grab their interest right at first." Bart observed that students could relate because, "You've got Holden Caufield, who is the quintessential teen-in-crisis."

Four prospective teachers selected another mainstay of the youth canon, *The Lord of the Flies*, for a similar reason. Emily said, "With the characters being the students' ages, it's an easy connection that they can make." She also selected *Hamlet* because she, again, believed students could relate:

> They think "God, they did that back then?" . . . He thinks his mom or his uncle or whoever this man is murdered his dad and then married his mom, and he's, you know, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and he had this complex and all that other stuff, and they get all excited because it's like real, real life drama . . . It's a little soap opera.

For Emily, accessibility meant that the story had to be one that students could imagine happening in their contemporary world.

Three prospective teachers chose *Of Mice and Men* because they believed that it is a text to which students can relate. Danny, explaining his selection of yet another chestnut from the youth canon, compared *A Separate Peace* to *The Catcher in the Rye*, noting that students "can relate not only to the individual situations but also to the feelings that [the main characters] are having."

Genre: Like theme, genre was a criterion the prospective English teachers frequently used to explain their choices of particular texts but did not appear at all when they discussed how they would, in general, choose texts to teach. Jack, a junior, selected *Death of a Salesman* because he wanted students to read a drama, but not Shakespeare. Lydia, another junior, justified all six texts she chose because of the genres they represent: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *The Catcher in the Rye* as contemporary novels; *Of Mice and Men* as an American novel; *Death of a Salesman* and *Hamlet* as drama; and *The Color Purple* as something she called "different from what they [i.e., eleventh graders] are used to." Julie, a junior, justified choosing *The Red Badge of Courage* as a text of the type that provided an "historical perspective on war." These prospective teachers' notions of genre, as the examples above indicate, were not purely literary but rather were shaped by their beliefs about the types of literature with which students should become familiar.

Political: Applebee's (1990) data seem to show that English teachers have not strayed far from the traditional canon, contrary to the alarms raised by Hirsch (1987), Bloom (1987), and other cultural Cassandras. No one knows what these prospective teachers will do once they are in their own classrooms, but five of the eight offered political reasons for selecting certain texts. Although justifying one's choices by reference to the canon is also offering political reason, these prospective teachers talked in *explicitly* political terms.

Only one referred to political reasons as a criterion for choosing texts when they answered the general questions. Mona, a senior who student-taught at an inner-city high school, chose from the list three texts by African-Americans—*The Narrative of the Life of*

Frederick Douglass, *The Invisible Man*, and *The Color Purple*—justifying all on political grounds. Of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, she said: "I think it's important because it talks about his life and slavery and what it was like to be a black in the North." In justifying her selection of *The Color Purple*, Mona referred to all three texts by African Americans:

> There's a lot of stuff by black Americans that I haven't read and of them, there's only Douglass, Ellison, and Walker, they're the only ones I've read, and so I definitely would include those. Because I do think it's important to include black American literature.

When we asked if she knew of texts not on the list that she would substitute for any of the text she chose, she nominated *The Joy Luck Club*, noting that Amy Tan is Chinese-American. Earlier, Mona said that if she were teaching African-American students she would be sure to include texts by African-American authors but when presented a description of a school in which the students are all white, she argued that "it's just as important for white kids to read black literature as it is for black kids to read it."

Danny expressed similar political concerns. He explained his choice of *The Invisible Man* as a novel "from a minority perspective" that "absolutely has to be taught." Speaking about *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which he had not read and, therefore, did not feel he could include as one of his six, Danny said he wanted to choose it "because with all the problems with racism now, I think it's important to understand everyone's perspective."

Emily's explanation for selecting *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was even more explicitly political:

> A lot of opinions that he brings up, a lot of perspectives that he brings up that have been avoided in traditional thought, . . . in the teaching of history, in my life time has grown up from kind of glossing over the white man's treatment of the Indians and treatment of the slaves and over how these people actually felt. . . . Some of the speeches that I have read by [Douglass] have been very like a slap in the face, "Wake up: this really happened, this is really how they felt." . . . People at a younger age are being faced with the idea that the United States isn't always the good guy.

Jack selected *Black Boy* because Wright doesn't "cut corners" but rather forces the reader to "face the race question."

Bart, a senior, offered the following justification for his choice of *Soul on Ice*:

> My understanding is that it's largely an autobiographical work. My interpretation at this point is that it would be about an individual who, as a black American growing up, faces a lot of prejudices in their lives, and how they deal with it. That's what I would want to focus on, how these people deal with the prejudices. From what I know about Eldridge Cleaver, he dealt with it in a very specific fashion.

Canon: As we noted above, the canon appears to be alive and well in the thinking of these prospective teachers. The canon does not, however, dominate their reasoning about text selection. Only three of the eight prospective teachers mentioned that the traditional canon would guide their selections when we asked how they would go about deciding which texts to teach. Bart, for instance, asserted that he does not believe one can teach an American literature class "properly without covering some Hemingway and Faulkner." Julie, after stating that she would choose the most commonly taught texts, goes on to say,

> Hawthorne . . . Walt Whitman. I think that a lot of canon things can't be thrown by the waste side just because they're canon things. Or contemporary things just thrown in because they're a new look. I think that there really is a lot of value in learning things just for being a functional member of society and understanding. . . . Even in commercials, and all the time, things are being referenced, and I think that I would include a lot of canon things in my curriculum even if I had the freedom not to.

Julie, as Margaret Malenka's (1993) detailed treatment reveals, stands out from the others in our sample in her whole-hearted embrace of the canon. Lydia, a junior, did not provide a similar rationale but agreed with Julie:

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> Everybody [should] read some Shakespeare, some Faulkner, some Poe, some Emily Dickinson. Not any work in particular, just at least a piece from great authors.

Most of the prospective teachers, like Joellen, a junior, resisted the idea that all pupils should read particular texts:

> I don't think that there's any one piece of literature that offers more than another piece. I think it's important to expose some different kinds of literature. They offer you a different time period and a different way of looking at life, and I think that's important.

Emily, a senior, spoke from her "personal perspective" and rejected the notion that there are texts that all students should read. More intent on what she called "elements" of literature that students should learn and can use "across the board," she acknowledged, however, that from a "standardized-testing perspective," students should read texts like *Romeo and Juliet* that are likely to appear on such tests. She appeared to struggle with the classic dilemma of teachers who have personal and professional beliefs that conflict with the expectations of those who construct standardized tests.

Although she also objected to the idea that all students should read certain texts, Mona did so on different grounds:

> I don't like the question because it's like saying that I'm going to tell everyone what they should read. I have my favorites, but I don't think that everyone should necessarily read my favorites just because I like them.

Later, however, Mona explained that she would first solicit her students' preferences and then she would "go by my own value of what I think is good literature and probably my own favorites."

When asked about why they chose particular texts to teach, four of the prospective teachers justified their choices by reference to the canon. Julie's response was notable because she justified three of her texts—*The Scarlett Letter*, *The Chosen*, and *Hamlet*—as products of canon authors who students had to read. The other two prospective teachers used canonical reasons to explain their choices of Shakespearean plays: "*Macbeth* is a classic, and everybody has to have Shakespeare." (Danny) Interestingly, Emily offered a canon-like argument for *Our Town*:

> It sounds like a really ignorant reason. . . . It is so widely read, and . . . everyone that talks about it remembers doing it in high school and remembers enjoying it in high school and remembers learning a lot from it in high school. So I figured it must have merit. So, it's on that need-to-read list.

Aesthetic: Although only one of the prospective teachers mentioned aesthetic reasons in discussing how she would, in general, choose texts to teach, five provided aesthetic reasons for selecting particular texts, usually referring to the emotional power of the text. Mona explained several of her choices using aesthetic rationales: *The Invisible Man* is "really powerful . . . because it showed really subtle, meaning;" *The Great Gatsby* is "really understated." *The Color Purple* is a "very valuable piece of literature." Danny explained that *Of Mice and Men* "can evoke so much emotion." Mary similarly spoke of the power of *Macbeth*.

Other reasons offered: Asked in general about choosing texts to teach, three of the prospective teachers discussed their *personal preferences*. Bart explained that, in choosing a text, he "would have to like it—it would have to be something that worked for me." Joellen, rejecting the idea of particular texts, noted that her feelings about the text would be important: "There's things that I enjoy more than others, and I would enjoy teaching them more."

Only three of the prospective teachers spoke explicitly about their *personal preferences* as a basis for choosing particular texts. Our insistence on hearing the reasons for prospective teachers' choices of texts may have led them to emphasize "external" reasons (i.e., qualities of the work) as opposed to "internal" reasons (i.e., their own preferences). Some personal preferences are probably included in the aesthetics category as several prospective teachers discussed how "moving" certain texts are.

Several of the prospective teachers referred to the kinds of *pedagogical treatments* to which texts lend themselves when asked how they selected the texts they would teach. Jack, a junior, adopted the most utilitarian position. He referred to literature as a "tool . . . towards teaching students to think critically and towards teaching them to be able to read on their own, and to look into almost any piece of literature around." Continuing this line of reasoning, Jack said:

> Whatever I use, I want to be able to use it in a way . . . that's towards the goal of not necessarily teaching that piece of literature, but more towards teaching how to read literature and how to read it on your own and to be able to pick up anything.

Bart identified the short story as a literary genre that he would use because it lends itself to treatment in schools better than longer works: "They can get through a short story in one night." Embedded in Bart's thinking were his beliefs about the short story, about his responsibilities as a teacher, and about students' capabilities.

Pedagogical value was infrequently mentioned to justify the selection of particular texts. Emily, a senior who had completed student teaching, discussed her choice of *The Lord of the Flies* and observed that, "It brings up a lot of questions about society" that lend themselves to classroom discussion. Mona, another senior, explained that she chose *Hamlet* over *Macbeth* because "there's more room for philosophy in *Hamlet*." She added,

> I would try to get as many different things as I could just so that they can see that Shakespeare does not have to be performed one way every time you see it, but it can be performed in different periods. Just by staging, we can change, subtly, meanings.

Yet another senior, Bart, chose *The Red Badge of Courage* because he "would find different critical interpretations of that and may tie it in that way if I were going to use critical review." The only junior to offer the pedagogical value of a text as a reason for choosing it was Jack, who thought that *The Great Gatsby* raised "a lot of good questions, I think, for students to start to consider and to start to think about."

Two of the prospective teachers, when asked about selecting texts in general, expressed their belief that the district or school would have a set *curriculum* that would determine which texts they would use. Both of these prospective teachers were seniors who had completed their student teaching. As Bart remarked, "A lot of times schools have, depending on the teacher and the class, . . . some set ideas of the way you have to do this and this and this." One prospective teacher, in responding to the general question, mentioned that the texts she chose would depend on her *goals*.

Summary: As we noted, the prospective English teachers in our pilot study offered different criteria for choosing texts to teach depending on the context of our question. When asked in general about how they would select texts to teach, most mentioned the accessibility of the text—that is, whether or not students could relate to the characters and plot. Asked in the context of choosing from among specific texts, they tended to pay particular attention to the theme of a work—especially to political themes focused on the experience of African Americans. This underlines the degree to which the perceived didactic value of the text appeared to influence their preferences.

The didactic appeal of text did not mean, however, that they chose texts from the traditional canon. A quarter of their choices came from the alternative category that consisted of works by authors of color—predominantly African American. When we presented them with descriptions of different school settings, about half of them substituted for the texts they originally chose. The rationale for such changes was accessibility—a particular text would be more likely to appeal to the types of students likely to be found at a given school. Those who did not change their original choices argued that all students needed to read the chosen text because of their didactic or canonical value.

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What We Are Learning

What have we learned about how prospective teachers think about literature and selecting texts to teach? Despite their protestations that they had not previously thought about what constitutes literature or texts they might choose to teach, we found that they could readily generate theories of literature and apply their theories both to general situations and in response to specific contexts.

We found that they used a range of text features in evaluating texts, that they are more likely to attend to the meaning of a text than to its reputation, and that they project onto a text the demands the text would make on and the opportunities it would provide for the reader. In judging the literary merit of texts, their senses of literature mark it as a category that includes: texts that are written down, have a theme; stories, fiction, books, prose; science and history; works of varying length; text that endure over time, are valued by others, included in a canon (both official and unofficial). For one of these prospective teachers, texts become literature only when they have, like good bourbon, aged. Beyond the features of the text, they looked at: the purposes the text could serve such as teaching readers about the injustices of a racist society, the senselessness and horror of war, and socio-political lessons; the ability of a text to enable readers to function in the "common culture," to provide an opportunity for self-exploration or the exploration of unfamiliar times, places, cultures, circumstances. They looked at how authors produce texts and how readers respond to them when they are truly "literature."

We learned that they believe no one has explicitly taught them how to make judgments about the literary or pedagogical merits of texts. Yet they were able to make reasoned choices, to reach reasoned decisions—however tentatively. This apparent paradox—their knowing how to do something that they claim not to have learned—is profoundly interesting. How is this possible? We think, in part, it is due to their capacity to be self-critical while engaged in this activity, to assess their own criteria, to spot inconsistencies, to revise ideas, and to accommodate exceptions.

This suggests to us that developing expertise in literature requires English majors to cultivate a sophisticated, highly qualified, and self-critical way of thinking—attributes of thinking in most disciplines but is, in this case, English-specific. We also believe they were drawing on experiences—both in and outside of classrooms. We are collecting data on such experiences but have yet to explore and understand these.

Even at this early stage of analysis of prospective English teachers' considerable repertoire of ideas about literary texts, we have come to understand how little we know about how they structure, organize, and draw on the various premises they use when making arguments about literature. They seem to elaborate different arguments, draw on different beliefs and rationales depending on the purposes they want to serve with literature. This, in turn, seems to allow for the possibility that they have developed understandings in specific contexts and, in trying to evaluate a text, they must reconfigure their prior understandings. For instance, in reading *Native Son* on their own, they have realized that they can learn about racial injustice whereas, in reading it in a class, they learn that analysis of complex characters can lead them towards a theme. When they approach another text, they may find that it lends itself to either or both analyses. The purpose for which they are examining the text may well be the factor that shapes their decisions. Understanding how they reconfigure their ideas and so construct their theories on the spot is the focus of our continuing work.

Notes

[1]Source: Understanding Literature for Teaching Projects, National Center for Research on Teacher Learning, 1993.

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APPENDIX A

The Text Classification Task

I want to shift gears a bit here and ask you to do an activity. We are interested in what you think is and what you think is not literature. We are not in a search of correct answers if any exist. Our purpose is solely to try to learn more about how undergraduate English majors think about written texts.

Could you tell me what texts or books or works you think of when you hear the word "literature"?

Now I want to present you with a bunch of different texts and we want you to tell me whether or not you consider each of them literature. As we are most interested in *how* you think about this issue, please think aloud and say whatever comes to your mind as you look at each text.

[The following texts are presented to the prospective teachers:]

The Complete Works of Shakespeare

On The Origin of Species

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

Native Son

A novel by Stephen King

A contemporary romance or fantasy novel (*Sunder, Eclipse and Seed*)

A high school history textbook (*The American Pageant*)

New Yorker

Ebony

People

The New York Times

College newspaper

A *Calvin & Hobbes* cartoon

A color magazine advertisement

A memo

The lyrics of "Total Control" by the Rap group, Guy

"In A Station of the Metro" (Ezra Pound)

"The Ball Turret Gunner" (Randall Jarrell)

APPENDIX B
Which of the following is literature?

Students	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Shakespeare								
Darwin								
Agee & Walker								
Wright								
King								
Fantasy novel								
Textbook								
Pound poem								
Jarrell poem								
New Yorker								
People								
Ebony								
NY Times								
College paper								
Cartoon								
Ad								
Memo								
Rap lyrics								

Key

Considered literature
Not ascertained
Not considered literature
Not sure

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APPENDIX C
Text Selection Task

4	Text	Author	Have read & WOULD include	Have read but WOULD NOT include	Haven't read but WOULD include	Haven't read & WOULD NOT include
	I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings	Angelou				
	The Fire Next Time	Baldwin				
	Forever	Blume				
	The Red Badge of Courage	Crane				
	Soul on Ice	Cleaver				
	Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass	Douglass				
	The Invisible Man	Ellison				
	The Great Gatsby	Fitzgerald				
	The Miracle Worker	Gibson				
	The Lord of the Flies	Golding				
	A Raisin in the Sun	Hansberry				
	The Scarlet Letter	Hawthorne				
	The Old Man and the Sea	Hemingway				
	Their Eyes Were Watching God	Hurston				
	Woman Warrior	Kingston				
	A Separate Peace	Knowles				
	To Kill a Mockingbird	Lee				
	Call of the Wild	London				
	Autobiography of Malcolm X	Haley/ Malcolm X				
	The Crucible	Miller				
	The Death of a Salesman	Miller				
	The Song of Solomon	Morrison				
	The Chosen	Potok				
	The Catcher in the Rye	Salinger				
	Hamlet	Shakespeare				
	Macbeth	Shakespeare				
	Grapes of Wrath	Steinbeck				
	Of Mice and Men	Steinbeck				
	Huckleberry Finn	Twain				
	The Color Purple	Walker				
	Ethan Frome	Wharton				
	Our Town	Wilder				
	Glass Menagerie	Williams				
	Black Boy	Wright				
	Native Son	Wright				

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Text Selection Task

Here is a list of books. Let's say that this is the recommended list of books for the school in which you are teaching. I'd like for you to take a minute and read the list over. To the right of each book title, check one of the boxes to show that

- you have read the book and would include it in your 11th grade curriculum
- you have read the book but would NOT include it in your 11th grade curriculum
- you haven't read the book but would include it in your 11th grade curriculum
- you haven't read the book and would NOT include it in your 11th grade curriculum

We are asking you whether you've read the book NOT to find out what you have and haven't read. We need to know whether or not you've read the book so we can understand how you go about deciding what books you think students ought to read.

After you have marked your choices, I'm going to ask you more about your thinking. Let me know when you're finished.

[Prospective teachers fill in check list above.]

Teachers of course have to make choices because they can't teach everything they'd like to teach. Look at the books that you said you *would include*. Let's say your class of 11th graders only had time to read six of these during a year. Put a check mark in the box to the left of the *six books* you would choose for your 11th graders to read.

Now I'd like you to go through the six books you have chosen for your 11th grade English class and tell me why you included each. [Probe to find out what criteria the interviewee used in selecting the text (readability, appeal to youth, expectations of society/family/colleges, etc.).]

What about those books you have read but wouldn't include? Why have you rejected these? [Probe to find out what criteria the interviewee used in rejecting the text (readability, appeal to youth, expectations of society/family/colleges, etc.).]

Are there books not on this list that you would include among the six you would want your 11th graders to read? [If yes, find out the book and then ask:] And which of the six that you checked would you drop to make room for this one?

Here's a description of a particular school—we're calling it "School A." [Give interviewee description of School A]. Read the description and then tell me if your choice of books would be different if you were teaching in this school.

School A

School A is located in an urban area where unemployment is high. About 55% of the students are African-American, another 25% are white, 15% are Latino, and 5% are Asian-American. A large proportion of these students come from impoverished families. Less that half the students have gone on to college in recent years. Many enter the military after graduation.

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And here's a description of a another school—"School B." [Give interviewee description of School B]. Read it and then tell me if your choice of books would be different if you were teaching in this school.

School B

School B is located in a suburban community. Most of the adults are employed in plants or businesses located in or near their neighborhood. Few professionals live in the community and few residents have college degrees. Like graduates of School A, less than half of the students in School B go to college and a number opt for military service. The student population is almost totally white—roughly 95%.

And finally, here's a description of School C. [Give interviewee description of School C]. Read it and then tell me if your choice of books would be different if you were teaching in this school.

School C

Like School B, this school is also located in a suburban area. The parents of many of the students are professionals and many people in the community have earned college degrees. The school population is about 80% white, 10% African-American, and 10% Asian-American. Each year, roughly 90% of the students go on to college.

Which of these descriptions sounds most like the school you attended?